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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to fill the gap in the field of communication concerning African American women. It postulates that the African American woman's unique experience with both racism and sexism influences specific types of communication when she is called upon to communicate solely with other African American women. It builds upon the psychological concept of internalized oppression among African American women and claims that it unconsciously manifests itself via small group communication. The paper introduces a proposed theoretical model which illustrates the fundamentals of particular unconscious communicative phenomena in an effort to stimulate further theoretical discussion and communication theory-building concerning African American women. Contains 22 references and a figure illustrating the theoretical model. (Author/RS)

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Unconscious Communication of Internalized Oppression Among African American Women: A Small Group Theoretical Model

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Abstract

This paper attempts to fill the gap in the field of communication concerning African American women. It postulates that the African American woman's unique experience with both racism and sexism influences specific types of communication when she is called upon to communicate solely with other African American women. The author builds upon the psychological concept of internalized oppression among African American women and claims that it unconsciously manifests itself via small group communication. The author introduces a proposed theoretical model which illustrates the fundamentals of particular unconscious communicative phenomena in an effort to stimulate further theoretical discussion and communication theory-building concerning African American women.

Introduction

Communication research and theory-building specifically concerning the Black American female does not exist in a state of abundance. In fact, no widely accepted theoretical model nor growing body of research by communication scholars which focuses on this precise population exists; this is a noticeable and detrimental omission to the field. The Black American female owns a unique place within the United States; her history, culture, and identity separate her from men who share her ethnicity and women who share her gender (Copeland, 1977; Robinson, 1983; Gainor & Forrest, 1991). Indeed, to be Black and female in America is special and demands scholarly consideration.

Much of the research that supports the above statements comes from the fields of history, sociology, psychology and counseling. One can confidently state that Black American women have been the subject of some study in these broad areas of social science. More recent research within the areas of psychology, counseling and related behavioral sciences focuses on the existence of oppression in the life of the Black American female. Due to her unique identity, being both Black and female, recent and current scholars explore the effects of racism and sexism in her life. Furthermore, among these researchers, a limited number focus on the Black woman's internalization of external oppressive attitudes about her that stem from these "isms" and its effect on her selfconcept and relationships with other Black American females (Dumas, 1985; Okazawa-Rey et al., 1986; Boyd-Franklin, 1987; Neal & Wilson, 1989). "Internalized oppression" has

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been widely accepted as the term for this process of "taking in and believing" external prejudices and has been described as the source of many of the delays toward progress in the total African American community (Semmes, 1992). Furthermore, some purport that this manifestation occurs largely at an "unconscious" level. This means that Black women internalize these external prejudices without a level of awareness that informs them they do so.

Though presently none have tried, one can relate the unconscious process of internalized oppression among African American women to the field of communication. First, psychologists and counselors support and substantiate the existence of internalized oppression among African American women from the data they gather in therapy and support groups; communication scholars would use the term "small group" to label these therapy and support networks. Second, a specific portion of small group communication and behavioral researchers purport that many unconscious psychological processes result in specific and subsequent, though often unknown, communication behaviors (Colman & Geller, 1985; Horwitz, 1985; Dumas, 1985; Smith & Berg, 1987). If this theory holds true, and research suggests that it does, it must also hold true that internalized oppression among African American women has communicative, though unconscious, manifestations. Along with this, these manifestations are observable and measurable within the small group context. Therefore, an unanswered call exists within the field of communication to research this phenomenon, identify particular research questions and hypotheses, develop schemas and models and substantiate theoretical perspectives that further its clarification. The present document serves as an attempt to answer the above-mentioned "communication" call. Four objectives have, therefore, been established: 1) To provide a review of the pertinent psychological and small group behavior literature concerning internalized oppression among all-female and all-African American female groups and introduce the only currently existing self-concept theory specifically for the African American female; 2) To introduce central behaviors that small group communication theorists have identified as stemming from the "unconscious" and connect these to the workings of internalized oppression among African American women within groups; 3) To provide a synthesized review and evaluation of the most recent contributions to small group communication theory and provide guidelines for acceptable theoretical contributions to this communication area; and 4) To introduce, explain and evaluate a working communication theoretical model which illustrates the presence of internalized oppression among African American women

in small groups.

Review of the Literature

Much of the current research focusing on internalized oppression among Black American women and all-Black female groups follows earlier studies on unconscious processes surrounding Black female leadership, attribution among Black female groups and the phenomenon of internalized oppression among all-female groups with varied racial/ethnic membership. Dumas (1985) contributes to early theoretical building concerning Black women within the field of communication. More specifically, she explores the dilemma of Black female leadership within organizations and maintains that damaging images of Black women lurk in the unconscious of organizational members, both White and Black. These images impede Black womens' ability to successfully take up roles of leadership. Dumas explains that, historically, Black women served in secondary and nurturing roles to White people and Black men. Essentially, Black women were called upon to coddle both groups and subsequently created an unconscious image of them as "mothers" or "mammies." Many Black women internalized and adhered to this nurturing role; those who did became "wonderful'9 mothers while those who rejected the role became "wicked." The fact that Dumas argues that these same stereotypes hide in the unconscious of Whites and Blacks today make her exploration relevant to this discussion. She states that as Black women attempt to emerge from this secondary role and work toward leadership within organizations, they find opposition from both White and Black group members who will not allow their essential "mothers" to abandon them (p. 325).
Though Dumas (1985) focused on the Black woman, she also explored her relationship with Whites and Black men. The work of Okazawa-Rey et al. (1986), however, serves as one of the most relevant studies which focus solely on the psychology of Black women, internalized oppression and their relatedness to each other with Black female groups. Though the researchers conduct an explorative rather than empirical analysis, they offer up vital information regarding Black women's historical and current propensity to fight amongst themselves over gradations of skin hue, varied hair texture and facial features. The researchers take their reader on a journey beginning with slavery where they state that plantation owners divided Black women up according to the "lightness," or "darkness" of their skin and whether they had the White/European features of long straight hair and angular noses. Those Black women with a light hue, "good" hair and facial structures emulating White women were considered more

beautiful and desirable than their darker counterparts by the slave masters. Blacks eventually internalized this belief among themselves and subsequent division among the slave population ensued. The researchers explain that this historical phenomenon created the precedent of division among Black American women which continues to present-day. They claim that Black women will pettily attribute certain characteristics to each other on the basis of their features. More importantly and relevant to this discussion, Okazawa-Rey et al., state that Black women's participation in this division over physical characteristics represents their contribution to their own oppression (p. 99). They do not, though, say more on how this manifests within the group context.

Pheterson (1986), however, does begin this discussion among all-female groups via her research on internalized oppression and domination as barriers to alliances between women. In a project she entitled the "Feminist Alliance Project," a multitude of women, separated into small groups, explored racial, religious, and sexual orientation issues that gave rise to oppressive and/or dominant attitudes. Most importantly in her research, Pheterson provides a definition of internalized oppression and an additional concept, internalized domination, that subsequent psychologists accepted and utilized. Pheterson defines internalized oppression as the "incorporation and acceptance by individuals within an oppressed group of the prejudices against them within the dominant society" (p. 148). Along with this, internalized domination is the "incorporation and acceptance by individuals within a dominant group of prejudices against others" (p. 148).

An analysis of both conceptual definitions reveals that one form of internalization cannot exist without the other. In addition to this, women can be a member of both a dominant and oppressed group simultaneously For example, a White, non-Jewish, lesbian woman who lives in a society where those who are Caucasian and Christian are dominant can internalize this concept of dominance and fain superiority. At the same time, her identity as a homosexual will encumber her with internalized feelings of inferiority due to the existence of severe discrimination against this group. Ultimately, Pheterson (1986) sought to explore the experience of women within their varied "group identities."

Woolsey and McBain (1987) also examine all-female groups. More specifically, they seek an answer to the perplexing question:
Why do a majority of all-female work groups, where race/ethnicity are

not delineated, experience intense hostility? Framing their analysis around issues of "power' and "powerlessness," the researchers put forth four theoretical explanations for the presence of conflict among the all-female work groups: a) the presence of perceived" power imbalances in that those women with a strong sense of self threatened the women with known insecurities; b) suppressed anger resulting from envy over the power imbalances; c) unmet stereotypical expectations of certain members that a group solely consisting of women would be a bastion of consistent warmth and support; and d) what the researchers call the "dark" side of the empirically proven occurrence of emotional richness within all-female groups.
In other words, when women come together to accomplish a work task, they also bring the desire to bond emotionally. This bonding, however, can run from strong support of each other to intense hostility and intragroup struggle.

.As Woolsey and McBain (1987) conducted their research on mixed ethnic all-female groups, psychologist Boyd-Franklin (1987;1991) launched a theoretical discussion of specific social-psychological issues for Black American women in their therapeutic groups. In two similarly focused articles, spaced four years apart, the scholar lists and explains seven of what she calls "re-current themes" that exist for the Black American female therapeutic support group. The first six themes deal with issue around Black women's culturally and historically driven fears of emotional expression, contending with the mythical lack of "good Black men," struggles with the maintenance of family and their individual needs, tenuous relationships with men and women who filled the role of mother or father in their life, but were not biologically related and the strong presence of spirituality in their lives.

It is the seventh re-current theme that emerges in therapeutic group work for African American women that points towards their unique struggle with internalized oppression and its effect on their relationships with each other. Boyd-Franklin (1987;1991) calls this theme "sisterhood vs. difference" and explains that many Black women who work in therapeutic groups with each other have a paradoxical need to feel "alike" while at the same time to prove that they are "not alike." For many Black women, this close-distant need stems from numerous painful experiences of internal group prejudice, from Black women, due to things such as differences in skin color, hair texture, social class, religion, education level and marital status. These internal wounds make it difficult for Black women to reach their desired "sisterhood," as Boyd-Franklin calls it.

She states, however, that the therapeutic support group provides an ideal arena to discuss and process these feelings. She advised her psychological and therapeutic colleagues to acquire a sensitivity to this as well as the former six re-current themes.

Neal and Wilson (1989) further the beginnings of Boyd-Franklin's (1987;1991) early work and serve as precursors to her later thinking. Similar to Okazawa-Rey et al. (1986), Neal and Wilson provide a historical overview of the role skin color, hair texture and facial features played in the division of the Black American community and more specifically of Black American females. They state that the Black female self-concept, self-worth, rate of societal success and level of intelligence are all effected by the perceptions their physical characteristics solicit. They assert that the reaction to physical characteristics effect Black women on a stronger psychological level because society demands more of women and their appearance. Lastly, they provide suggestions to those in the therapeutic field to pay particular attention to the resulting resentment and anger" among their Black female clients as a result of experiences concerning their physical features (p. 330).

Gainor (1991) furthers the work of the previously discussed researcher, but also claims a prominent space as one of the few current researchers to conduct a psychological study specifically on internalized oppression among African American female therapeutic groups. It is from her work that any additional field's theoretical base must stem. In her article entitled "Internalized Oppression as a Barrier to Effective Group Work with Black Women," Gainor argues that the phenomenon of internalized oppression serves as a severe barrier to effective therapeutic work in all-Black female groups. Gainor reports that while she led such a group, numerous conflicts concerning historically and emotionally charged issues such as skin color, hair texture, socioeconomic status, speech patterns (talking "Black" versus talking "White") arose. The women would argue among each other over "who-was~more-oppressed" depending on their own painful experiences around these issues (p. 237). Gainor reports that supportive and healing group work came to a stop as these conflicts sabotaged necessary collaboration. She points out, however, that what separated the women was not the actual differences among them, but their belief that the differences made it impossible for them to unite (p. 237). Though Gainor does not identify this statement as a component of the unconscious, this writer does. This means that the women in the group carried these beliefs about each other in their unconscious. Only because they were in a setting where discovery of

what "lurks" in the unconscious serves as the key objective, did the women come to know they held these beliefs. It is possible that this type of lethal unconscious activity stays at this unnoticeable level for women who do not participate in a therapeutic process; thus, many of the attitudes go unchallenged nor changed.

African American Female Self-Concept Theory Building

Though the self-concept of the African American, without delineation of gender, has been the subject of considerable sociological and psychological study, it does not lend itself to addressing the specific experience of the Black female in America. Therefore, this paper focuses on the small, yet significant, contribution to this specific area. This focus facilitates a clearer discussion on what Black American women bring to communication within the small group context..

Copeland (1977) distinguishes the development of the self-concept for the Black woman from her White female counterpart. She states that the experience of the Black woman in America is not the same as that of the White woman, therefore, self-concept theories meant for White women cannot be used to understand Black women. She accuses those within her field of ignoring the Black female self-concept and makes an attempt to offer her view of the historical dimensions that have contributed to the development of negative and positive self-concepts.

Currently, only one comprehensive framework that attempts to capture the self-concept creation for the Black American female exists; this belongs to Brown-Collins and Sussewell who created it in 1986. These researchers incorporate the interactive effects of racism, sexism and individual differences in the development of "self" for the African American woman. The following discussion offers the main components of the Brown-Collins and Sussewell model as discussed by Gainor and Forrest (1991).

Three categorical self-referents compose the African American female's self-concept. One of these referents breaks down in two parts. And within each of these referents lie several identified "selves." The creators of the model claim that the totality of these referents and selves interact, combine and collide within each African American woman to formulate her total self-concept. Gainor and Forrest (1991) state that Brown-Collins and Sussewell label the first of these referents the "psychophysiological" referent. This relates to the

African American female's knowledge of herself as a woman: biologically and socially. This part of her conceptualization of self allows her to identify not only with other Black women, but with women regardless of ethnic orientation. This referent includes the "caring," "nurturing," and "maternal" selves (p. 262).

The second part of an African American woman's self-concept consists of her "African American" referent. This relates to her sociopolitical identity. Brown-Collins and Sussewell split this into two additional parts: the Afro/Black referent and the Euro/White referent. The overall African American community serves as the point of reference for the Afro/Black referent; here she draws her sense of connection and belonging to other Blacks. An African American woman removes herself from her psychophysiological link to White women with this referent in the forefront. Forrest and Gainor (1991) state that the "group," "liberating," and "strategic" selves comprise parts of the Afro/Black referent (p. 263). On the other hand, the "slave," "oppressed," "ugly," and "trapped" selves comprise the Euro/White referent (p. 263). Forrest and Gainor (1991) state that this referent develops from the Black American female's life experience in White and racist America. As she incorporates the racist and sexist attitudes about her, the Black women develops this self referent. The "myself" referent completes the triad which makes up the Black American female self-concept. This piece contains a Black woman 5 personal history and uniqueness as an individual. Her eye color, height, family background and economic status exemplify some of this referent's components; the "religious" and "sexual" selves reside here (p. 264). With this referent in the forefront, the Black American female sheds her ties to roles determined by her ethnicity and gender and only focuses on these as they pertain to a unique aspect of her individual life story. The selves within this referent as well as those previously discussed operate on conscious and unconscious levels. This point appropriately ushers in the subsequent section of this discussion.

Small Group Unconscious Communicative Processes

Small group communication/behavior researchers have identified several unconscious processes that make themselves known within the communication of a group. Two prominent examples of such processes will be used to build a bridge between the psychological function of internalized oppression among African American women and its expression within the small group context. An explanation of these two processes and a hypothetical application to internalized

oppression occurring within an African American female small group will follow.

"Projective identification" represents the first prominent unconscious communicative process to be discussed. Projective identification occurs when a member of a group unconsciously disassociates herself from some aspect of her personality or experience that in most cases she feels negatively towards; once she expels this aspect, she then projects it onto another group member who in turn unconsciously introjects the other's expelled part or parts (Eagle & Newton, 1981; Horwitz, 1985; Wells, 1985; Smith & Berg, 1987).

This process can only occur when the projector and introjector fulfill their roles. If a small group member projects something and no other member introjects it, then she has no one to mirror her expelled part and identification cannot take place. In turn, the introjector must connect with the expelled part in some way. This connective aspect of projective identification occurs through the process of "valency" which, defined, is a predisposition to be subject to some unconscious group process (Eisold, 1985). In other words, the introjector has a valence for whatever parts the projector expels.

Within the overall process of projective identification, it is possible that the member who introjects an extremely negative quality can become an "object of hate" for the group. For example, if one member projects her hated and dreaded "judgmental" characteristic onto another, then the group can come to hate and dread that member who introjects the quality. This aspect of projective identification introduces the second unconscious communicative function pertaining to this discussion: "scapegoating." Scapegoating occurs when a member of a small group unconsciously introjects unacceptable qualities of various other group members and therefore serves as a figurative receptacle for the group-as-a-whole (Eagle & Newton, 1981; Wells, 1985; Smith & Berg, 1987). Ultimately, members reject the symbolic role of the member and in doing so reject the behaviors and characteristics she has introjected. Scapegoating allows a group to unconsciously "off load" that which they don't want to deal with themselves; it is a defense mechanism (Eagle & Newton, 1981).

The following hypothetical application illustrates the potential for both projective identification and scapegoating to occur as a function of internalized oppression within African American female small groups.

Small group X consists of six African American women with varying skin hues, hairs textures and facial features. During a innocuous discussion, a lighter-skinned member of the group finds herself feeling an unexplainable anger towards one of the darker-skinned members. Painful memories of darker African American women ridiculing and hating her because of her light skin unknowingly lurk in the unconscious of this lighter member. The lighter-skinned woman off loads and projects this negative anger and experience onto the darker-skinned member. As this occurs, the darker member also experiences an unexplainable uncomfortability towards this same lighter-hued woman. Deep within her unconscious lie previous experiences where she often felt second-best and subsequently angry toward lighter-skinned women due to all of the attention their "so-called" beauty solicited. At this time, the darker woman introjects the projection of the lighter woman and begins to fulfill the role of the "angry dark-skinned Black woman." The lighter woman identifies strongly with the resulting discord with the darker woman in that it adjoins to the painful memories lying in her unconscious. As this occurs, "projective identification" takes place.

Along with this interaction between the two women, the remaining members recognize the scenario between the two women, but experience an unconscious need to separate themselves from their own connection to the roles the lighter and darker woman play. Therefore, the lighter members use the one light-hued woman to act out their painful experiences while the darker members use the one dark-hued woman to do the same. Ultimately, the two women in the original exchange become "scapegoats" for the group-as-a-whole.

Synthesized Review of Small Group Communication Theory

This paper maintains a focus on the launching of a small group communication theoretical model for African American women. To accomplish this task, it requires a review of what presently exists within the overall area of small group communication. The work of Cragan and Wright (1990) facilitates this objective in that they provide a summary of what scholars in the area of small group communication developed during the 1980's.

Ultimately, Cragan and Wright (1990) named seven major lines of research that occurred within the area of small group communication. The first of these consisted of a steady stream of criticism of the research and theory in small group communication that occurred then. Scholars inhabiting this camp of research

criticized their colleagues for developing quasiparadisms for research of small groups. Along with this, small group communication scholars generated research concerning the varying types of leadership within small groups as well as how professors within the field can better teach the fundamentals of small group communication; this serves as the second and third major lines of research that Cragan and Wright identify. The fourth and fifth major lines of research consist of the tradition of classical discussion methods occurring in the small group context, i.e., face-to-face or computerized teleconferences and the outcomes that result from this type of communication.

The final two lines of small group communication research which Cragan and Wright (1990) list relate most to the topic of this scholarly endeavor. They state that a strong portion of research in the 1980's concerned itself with the "process of small group communication. For example, scholars studied how groups came to a decision rather than the actual decision. Along with this, another group of researchers looked at the variables occurring within a small group that affected the communication among its members. This paper argues that the process of internalized oppression among African American women unconsciously affects communication within small groups; this hypothesis fits with those put forth in these final lines of research.

Trends for Theory Building in Small Group Communication

This section serves as the final precursor to the introduction of the small group communication theoretical model for African American women. It reveals where in particular this model may fit among those that currently exist within the field. In addition to their identification of major lines of research and theory, Cragan and Wright (1990) also project four new trends to occur in their field in the 1990's. In brevity, they predict that: 1) there will be competing theoretical explanations for small group communication; 2) Multiple models for describing and researching the decision-making process within small groups will occur; 3) Competing definitions of small group will emerge; and 4) Small group communication will be studied in applied settings. This discussion's proposed model for communication among African American women confirms the accuracy of Cragan and Wright's predictions.

African American Female Small Group Communication Model

The theoretical model, which appears on the next page, illustrates the

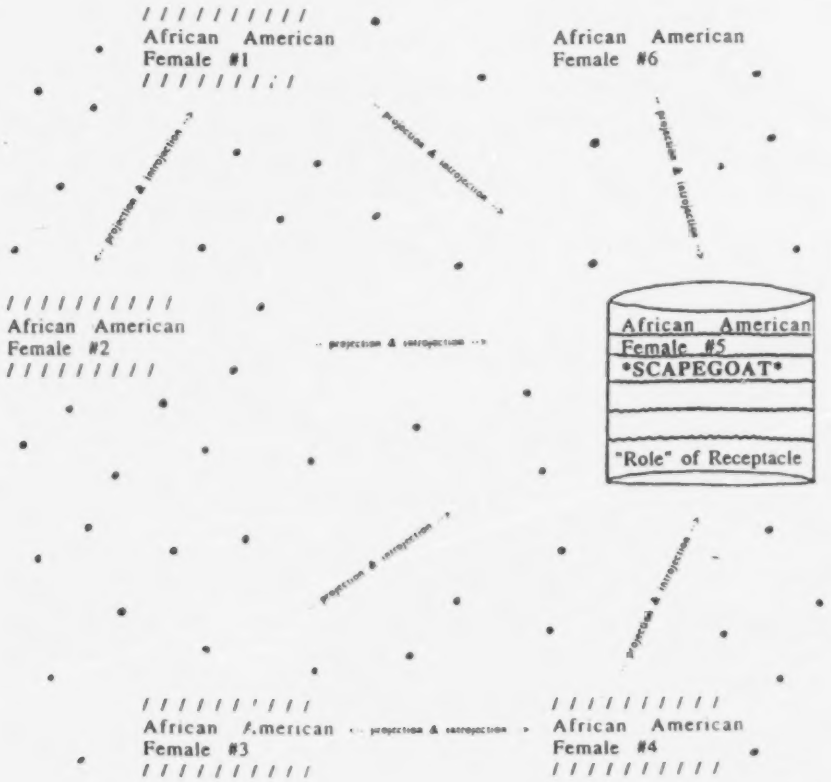
presence of internalized oppression as an unconscious process operating within the small group communication of African American females. Its purpose is to begin discussion on this specific communication phenomenon and serve as a catalyst to theory building concerning it.

Small Group Communication Theoretical Model

Unconscious Communicative Manifestations of Internalized Oppression Within African American Female Small Groups

Black Dots = The overall *unconscious* presence of internalized oppression among African American females

/ / / / / = Group member's experience of *anger* and *discord*



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Discussion of Proposed Theoretical Model

The model illustrated on the previous page represents a theoretical premise from which to describe the unconscious communication of African American women in the small group context. It does not portray what all African American women experience in any small group, but rather demonstrates the potential each woman and each small group exchange holds.

The model depicts six African American women engaging in small group communication. Two sets of women within the group, numbers 1 and 2, 3 and 4, experience anger and discord due to the unconscious communicative manifestation of internalized oppression; this can be seen via the two-way arrows. Along with this, five of the women use African American woman #6 as a receptacle for their unconsciously unwanted parts associated with their own internalized oppression as shown by the one-way arrows.

What theoretically results for African American female #6 is a sense of total disconnection from the other women in the group and ultimately a need to "get away" from the small group exchange; in doing so, she plays the role of scapegoat. Along with this, African American females #1 and #2, #3 and #4, remain in the group, but harbor ill-feelings towards their figurative dance partners in a relentless episode of unconscious communication. Ultimately, the small group context does not serve as a viable place for free-flowing and useful communication and exchange, but rather stagnates in an unproductive and oppressive place.

Two final key points remain for this discussion concerning the proposed theoretical model. First, no woman within the model has a permanent role in the depicted small group episode. In fact, the model is presented with the implied assumption that any of the women could have filled any of the roles. In addition to this, the exact elements that the women pull from their experience with internalized oppression need not be specified. The psychological literature reviewed within this discussion suggest that these elements can range from skin color and hair texture to socioeconomic status and body image. Second and lastly, the scattered black dots throughout the model demonstrate that internalized oppression has the possibility of making its way into the unconscious of any Black woman living in America. Only those women who develop a sense of self and a connectedness to other Black women away from the oppressive attitudes stemming from the systems of racism and sexism stand a chance to escape it.

Evaluation of the Theoretical Model

As stated in the introduction of this paper, one of the purposes of this overall endeavor is to begin the development of models and theoretical perspectives in the area of communication concerning African American woman. Small group communication has been chosen as the specific communication context for this paper's ideas to be contributed. According to Poole (1990), certain criteria exist which determine whether a proposed theoretical framework makes a valuable contribution to small group communication. The author of this paper has chosen to apply these criteria for a brief evaluation in order to argue its continued development.

Poole (1990) states that in order for a new theoretical perspective in small group communication to succeed in acceptance and application by the area's scholars, it must meet three criteria. First, the theory must capture the imagination of those within and outside of the field (p. 237). Though it is difficult to state with certainty that the proposed theoretical model within this discussion meets this criteria, it can be asserted that by its sheer originality within the field, it can draw substantial attention. Second, the theory must attempt to untangle confusions and solve puzzles (p. 237). The phenomenon of internalized oppression and its unconscious communicative manifestations is indeed a puzzle. The under girding intent for the model within this paper is to begin untangling the quagmire of inability of many African American women to achieve successful communication in small groups.

Third and lastly, the theory must address meaningful and important concerns (p. 237). According to Poole, many of the theories that current scholars contribute to the area of small group communication are sound on technical fundamentals, but lack in the areas of social desirability and the ability to address the concerns of ordinary people (pp. 237-239). It is the hope of this model's creator that of all the criteria, it meets this one. In her own experience, too often one must work hard to make sense of many of those theories that are currently within the field of communication and when that sense is finally made, the question "what's the use" often arises. This paper begins with the argument that the issues of communication and internalized oppression among Black American women are, without question, meaningful and important. Scholars outside of the field of communication have established that ordinary Black American women must contend with the damaging effects of internalized

oppression regularly. The model within this paper attempts to place this established idea in front of the figurative lens of communication. The progression of the model and the ideas it contributes will determine whether, in fact, this can ultimately be achieved.

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